Effective Public Communication

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Small Organization

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Abstract

The Tampa Bay section of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) has conducted a highly successful public policy program for a number of years. Despite limited resources and a small membership, the section has demonstrated significant achievements both at a local and national level. This paper describes two of the largest projects and provides lessons learned which can be applied by other small organizations in conducting highly effective public communication programs.

The section successfully produced a one-hour video, entitled "Space: A Commitment to a Prosperous Future", which outlined the potential benefits of the U.S. space program and described Space Station Freedom and the Space Exploration Initiative. Interviews with astronauts and filming at the Kennedy Space Center highlighted the show. By working closely with AIAA and securing local corporate sponsorship, the section was able to acquire the necessary monetary resources to produce the video. It was also found that many organizations are willing to assist with such projects in return for advertisements in the credits. These organizations proved invaluable for the acquisition of video segments, space-related art, and music. The video has been utilized by sections throughout the U.S. for communicating space benefits to the public.

The section also served as the local focal point for the Space Exposed Experiment Developed for Students (SEEDS). This NASA-sponsored project brought tomato seeds which spent over five years on board the Long Duration Exposure Facility (LDEF) into classrooms for student experiments. Section efforts led to widespread distribution of the SEEDS materials. By working with local science administrators, the section coordinated SEEDS activities throughout the Tampa Bay area. An educators conference was sponsored by the section to encourage participation and provide background materials. The conference featured aerospace industry leaders and included a hands-on horticultural demonstration provided by the local county co-op.

Introduction

The Tampa Bay section of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics is a small section (approximately 150 members) comprised of aerospace professionals and retirees residing on the central west coast of Florida. The section is responsible for a number of activities including dinner meetings, special tours, continued technical education, and public policy. The objectives of the section's public policy program are to heighten public awareness of the benefits of aerospace technology, to encourage young students to pursue careers in science and technology, and to keep members apprised of key aerospace-related legislative activities. In recent years, these objectives have been accomplished through a wide variety of initiatives.

Two major programs have provided the cornerstones of these initiatives. In the first, the section produced a one hour video, entitled "Space: A Commitment to a Prosperous Future", which outlined the potential benefits of the U.S. space program and described Space Station Freedom and the Space Exploration Initiative. This video has been used by AIAA sections throughout the United States for airing at section meetings, schools, and other public displays.

With the second major project the section helped bring space-flown tomato seeds to students in the region to conduct biological experiments. In all, over 120 schools participated allowing several thousand students to conduct experiments.

This paper outlines these projects in detail and summarizes the "lessons learned" so that other small organizations may successfully conduct public communications programs.

Origins of the Video Production

The first major public policy project completed by the section was the production of a video entitled ""Space: A Commitment to a Prosperous Future". The goal of the video was to provide the viewer with an understanding of the benefits derived from the space program and NASA's plans for future programs. This project provided the section with its first lessons in conducting an effective public communications program.

The section first elected to produce a video in 1988 after the release of a series of studies on the future of the U.S. civil space program. These studies, including "Pioneering the Space Frontier" from the National Commission on Space and "Leadership and America's Future in Space" by Dr. Sally Ride, provided ambitious goals for the U.S. space program. However, industry and government leaders agreed that none of the goals would be achieved without grass root support from the American

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public. The Tampa Bay section leadership convened to discuss whether a small organization such as ours could heighten public awareness and support for the program. We quickly realized that the production of a video which outlined the benefits of the space program would be an effective contribution.

The first step in developing the video was to secure financial support. The national AIAA office provided the primary funding for the production. This office is responsible for the funding of all AIAA operations with money derived from member dues, conference fees, and publication subscriptions. Money is available to sections in four ways. The first, Category I, is automatically provided to the section based on member population. Category I funds are typically used to support ongoing section activities such as dinner meetings. Category II disbursements accompany awards to sections in various categories such as outstanding overall section, best newsletter, and best public policy program. Category III funding is disbursed at the discretion of regional directors who typically use it to fund special projects, such as the video. Category IV funding is similarly disbursed, but at a national level at the discretion of AIAA's Vice President for Member Services.

To secure funding from AIAA, the section submitted a proposal both to the regional director and the Vice President for Member Services. This proposal outlined, in detail, the goals and objectives of the project. It also included a description of the production process along with anticipated costs. Personal calls were made to the regional director and Vice President for Member Services to secure support for the program. Shortly after submitting the proposal, the section was allocated $2700 for the project from Category III and IV funding. This provided the primary source of revenue for the production.

The section council realized that, in addition to the AIAA funding, the project required a base of operations and location for filming and editing. The section chairman approached Honeywell's Space and Strategic Systems Operation, a local aerospace company and a longtime supporter of AIAA activities. A presentation was made to the head of the community affairs department, in hopes of securing support. The presentation outlined the goals of the project, described the budget and AIAA appropriations, and made specific requests for Honeywell's support: use of Honeywell's extensive editing facilities and video library and the services of an in-house media professional to act as consultant and editor. The department immediately recognized the benefit of the project and committed itself to meeting our requests.

Video Project Management

Effective project management was found to be a key factor in completing the project with limited resources. The project management process utilized by the section can be summarized as follows:

1. Select project participants
2. Gain consensus on specific project goals
3. Identify the overall production process with associated inputs and outputs at each step
4. Assign the tasks to project participants
5. Develop a schedule to accomplish each task in the production process
6. Execute and monitor the plan
7. Continually motivate project personnel
8. Provide ample credit for participants

A core set of project participants was selected from the section membership. Visionary individuals willing to personally dedicate themselves to the success of the project were sought. Given the beneficial nature of the production and the potential for personal and professional recognition, talented team members were not too difficult to find. These participants formed the nucleus of the organization and "championed" each major activity. They in turn recruited additional personnel who gladly volunteered given the worthy objectives of the project and assurances that nobody would be required to put in excessive time.

The core set of volunteers convened on several occasions to select the theme of the video. Initially, team members brainstormed approaches to the production. After freely discussing the merits and drawbacks of each alternative, a unanimous approach was selected. The team agreed to an outline which first educated the viewer about past benefits of the space program and then provided a vision of the future with Space Station Freedom, a lunar base, and human expeditions to Mars. By building consensus in this way, the team formed a bond and all members felt a sense of ownership for the product.

With the team in place and a vision of the product established, definition of the production process began. Despite the lack of experience with video productions, the team was able to determine the proper course of action by identifying the major elements necessary for production: video segments, narration, music, and an editing facility. We further refined the process by considering what tasks were necessary to obtain each element. For example, in order to obtain video segments, basic concepts first needed to be developed. Then organizations with appropriate footage, such as NASA's Media Services Branch, then needed to be solicited for participation. Finally, candidate videos needed to be identified and reviewed for selection of specific segments which matched the timing of the narration. Each of these steps was laid out into a cohesive process and the inputs and outputs identified.

Once the overall process was defined and specific tasks identified, the team divided up the work. With a final completion data identified, each member developed a schedule for completion of his or her set of tasks. These schedules were integrated and work commenced.

Periodic meetings were held to coordinate activities and ensure that work progressed on schedule. Troubleshooting activities were handled by developing solutions as a team and, if necessary, dividing up addition work. From a project management standpoint, one of the most difficult activities was keeping the team motivated. But by sharing ideas and concerns with other team members and praising incremental progress, a high level of morale was maintained.

Upon completion of the project, ample credit was provided to the participants. Letters of commendation, signed by the section chairman, were sent to each participant and their work supervisor. Section awards were also presented to each member at a ceremony during a dinner meeting. Each participant also received acknowledgment in the credits of the video.

Acquiring Video and Art Donations

Another key factor in the success of the video project was our ability to obtain donations of video segments and space art from a number of diverse organizations. These acquisitions were vital to the success of the project.

The largest source of video segments was from NASA's Media Services Branch. Since the major objective of the department is to make NASA videos available for public use, obtaining videos from them was particularly easy. Available releases include shuttle mission highlights, short animated segments of space station operations, and space spin-off summaries. We selected a set of full length videos from the list they provided and they were forwarded to us promptly.

Other video segments were obtained from organizations with no direct relationship to the space program. For example, a portion of the script discussed medical benefits which have derived from the space program. Video segments of medical equipment were thus needed. These segments were obtained by talking to administrators at Tampa General Hospital who were willing to volunteer for the project. In return, a "special thanks" credit was included at the end of the video.

As part of a discussion about the Space Exploration Initiative, space art was needed to portray lunar base and Mars mission concepts. Two sources were found for the art; Eagle Engineering in Clear Lake, TX and Bob McCall in Phoenix, AZ. Again these participants willingly volunteered their artwork in return for credit in the video.

Filming Special Segments

Three notable special segments were filmed as part of the project: a sit-down interview with astronaut Charlie Walker, a tour of space station module mock-ups with astronaut Sonny Carter, and a segment on safety-related shuttle modifications filmed at Kennedy Space Center. Each of these segments demonstrated that organizations are often willing to lend assistance to a production perceived to have good intentions. In the case of the NASA filming segments, the production was in our mutual interest as well.

The Charlie Walker segment originated when Mr. Walker, who had been apprised of our effort, called to volunteer for the interview. At his expense, he traveled to Clearwater, FL to tape the interview at Honeywell. The project team developed interview questions, reorganize the storyboard to accommodate interview segments, and select a filming location. The Walker interview segments lent tremendous credibility to the production and provided much more impact to descriptions of physiological adaptations to zero gravity. In addition, Mr. Walker's presence boosted the morale of the entire team.

The second special segment was a tour of the space station module mock-up at Johnson Space Center (JSC). When apprised of our production and wish to film there, JSC public affairs personnel were extremely cooperative. We were given use of the modules for a morning and astronaut Sonny Carter volunteered to act as tour guide. A film crew was hired in the Houston area and travel expenses for the director/coordinator were covered by the production budget. The tour featured descriptions of experiments to be conducted in the laboratory module and descriptions of life in the habitation module including sleeping, showering, food preparation, and medical facilities. The tour provided the foundation for our discussion of Space Station Freedom.

The final special segment was a description of Space Shuttle safety modifications filmed at the Kennedy Space Center (KSC). As with JSC, KSC public affairs personnel enthusiastically supported our efforts. We were given access to Columbia in the Orbiter Processing Facility for a description of the modifications to the orbiter/external tank interfaces and implementation of the nosewheel steering system. We were also allowed to film near launch pad 39B for a discussion of the history of the shuttle program and future plans for space station support.

Origins of the SEEDS Project

The second major public policy project conducted by the section was to serve as the focal point for the Space Exposed Experiment Developed for Students (SEEDS) program. This program, sponsored by NASA, allowed schoolchildren the opportunity to become directly involved in a space experiment. The goal of the experiment was to determine whether the space environment has an adverse effect on plant seeds. The first part of the experiment began when thousands of tomato seeds were flown on board the Long Duration Exposure Facility (LDEF) to be exposed to the space environment. LDEF was launched on STS-41C in 1984 and retrieved by STS-32 in early 1990. During this time, an identical set of seeds from the same lot was stored in a

controlled environment at the Park Seed Company in South Carolina

Upon the return of LDEF and the space tomato seeds, NASA assembled packages containing 50 space seeds and 50 Earth seeds. These packages were made available to schools, free of charge, to allow students to grow each set and monitor growth or physiological differences. The packages also included data collection cards to be sent back to NASA to collect data from around the country for analysis and documentation.

When the section became aware of the SEEDS program in 1989, the council convened to discuss the possibility of participating. Since section members had spoken at local schools on numerous occasions and knew many of the faculty and administrators, it was decided that expanded section involvement in educational activities was in order. Two activities were identified where the section could be most effective: provide information to schools on SEEDS availability and hold an educator's conference to provide teachers with background on the SEEDS program and tips for conducting experiments.

As with the video project, a team was assembled to support the SEEDS effort. Fortunately, the section budget covered the little funding was needed for the project. Thus a financial sponsor was not required.

Coordinating the SEEDS Project

Coordination of the SEEDS project began by contacting the SEEDS office at NASA headquarters to obtain further information and application packets. As with the video production experience, NASA was very responsive to our efforts. They forwarded numerous information packages on the SEEDS program, experiment ideas for various age groups, other LDEF experiments, and hundreds of applications for the program.

Team members then contacted the science coordinators of all counties throughout the Tampa Bay area. All of these coordinators were enthusiastic about the SEEDS project and agreed to forward information packages to each elementary, middle, and high school in their county. Information packages and applications were sent to these advisors for their use. The project leaders decided that rather than use the section as a clearinghouse for the program, the schools should obtain the experiment kits directly from NASA to avoid introducing another, unnecessary level of bureaucracy.

In addition to the science advisors, section members made SEEDS applications available to parents throughout the area in hopes that they would encourage their children's teachers to participate. An advertising campaign was initiated to inform parents of the availability of the experiment kits. Flyers were printed and sent to all section members who were encouraged to post them in their work areas, churches, etc. Announcements of SEEDS availability were also made at section meetings.

Since schools obtained experiment kits directly from NASA, an exact count of local participation is unavailable. Based on discussions from the science advisors, however, it is estimated that over 120 schools participated reaching more than 3000 students.

The SEEDS Educator's Conference

To help teachers conduct their experiments, the project leadership decided to sponsor an educator's conference. With approval from the council, funding for the conference was provided from the section treasury. Utilizing the same project management techniques that were successful for the video production, the SEEDS team agreed upon the goals for the conference: to provide teachers with more background on LDEF in general and the SEEDS program in particular and give them hands-on tips for successfully growing the tomato seeds in Florida. An outline for the conference soon followed.

With the outline developed, a set of tasks necessary to put on the conference followed. A schedule was devised to allow teachers the benefit of the information shortly before their experiment kits arrived.

One of the participating schools, Pinellas Park High School, volunteered to serve as the host organization for the conference. They provided the auditorium, audio/visual equipment, and cafeteria services for the conference.

To obtain a horticultural expert, we contacted the Pinellas County Cooperative Extension Service. Upon hearing of our efforts they immediately agreed to participate in the conference. Joan Bradshaw, the service's tomato expert, agreed to make the hands-on presentation.

The conference began with introductory remarks by Lindsay Ball, program manager for the Space Station program at Honeywell. Lindsay lauded the teachers for their important efforts in promoting math and science education. The introductory remarks were followed by a showing of the STS-32 post flight press conference, a video summary of the LDEF retrieval mission highlights narrated by the astronauts. Participants were then given an overview of the LDEF program goals and accomplishments with emphasis on the space borne tomato seeds. Background information on the SEEDS program was then provided with explanations of what to expect in the experiment kits. Also included in this presentation was a discussion of possible experiments to be conducted beyond standard growth comparison. Multi-generation observations and plant dissection were among the ideas presented. Finally, Joan Bradshaw made her hand-on presentation. She started with an overview of the optimal tomato growing procedures for Florida's climate. Using trays of tomato seedlings and plants at various stages of development, she demonstrated proper seed planting and transplant techniques. She also demonstrated the use of fertilizers and pesticides. She concluded by allowing the teachers to practice planting and

transplanting with tomato seeds and seedlings she provided.

Summary of Lessons Learned

The keys to conducting a successful public communications project in a small organization can be summed up as follows:

- Acquire a financial sponsor, if necessary. Sponsors can often be found who are willing to contribute to a good cause in return for credit
- Work with organizations to obtain additional assistance in the name of a good cause and/or in exchange for credit
- Implement good project management techniques. Of particular importance are selecting a dedicated team, gaining consensus on project goals, clearly defining tasks and schedules, continually motivating the team members, and providing ample credit for participants at the completion of the project
- Avoid implementing excessive bureaucracy

Conclusions

The Tampa Bay section of the AIAA has demonstrated that small organizations can successfully conduct significant public policy projects with modest resources. By implementing good project management, leveraging the positive perceptions of a volunteer organization, and building a good team, any small organization can successfully conduct outstanding public communications programs.